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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses "constructions" of school size in West Virginia and Ohio and related issues concerned with school and school district consolidation, and the role of education, politics, and globalization. "School size" is not the same as enrollment; grade span and level are important in understandings of size. Socioeconomic status also has an impact, so no one best size fits all cases. Research has shown that small school size and small district size diminish the well-known relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. In contrast to Ohio's 614 school districts, West Virginia has only 55--one for each county. Such large rural districts have considerable power in terms of local employment and politics. In Ohio, the state has long been frustrated in terms of consolidating districts and has now turned to consolidating schools within smaller districts, using the single-campus design in which all schools and district offices are located in one place. The Ohio consolidators have had a hard time convincing the people to give up local engagement with school districts but are having more success in separating communities from their schools. Unfortunately, this bad news is the old bad news. The ongoing bad news concerns changes in who constructs the institutional purposes of schooling and what those purposes are. The purpose of mass education shifted from supporting the existence of nation-states in the 19th century to defending the nation in the mid-20th century, and now it is being affected by the globalization of economics and politics. Schools that are locally cherished will help people resist global trends, but not under the guidance of those whose allegiance lies elsewhere. (SV)

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The Disappearing Local School in Two Appalachian States

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paper presented at the annual conference of the Appalachian Studies Association
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The Disappearing Local School in Two Appalachian States

Today I'm going to talk around issues related to the Ohio and West Virginia constructions of school size.

What do I mean ***"constructions"*** of school size? What kind of idiot am I?

You say, "School size is not so difficult, surely? It's obviously the number of kids or teachers in a school."

"Not so fast," is what I say.

One thing critical theory does teach us, is that we ought to be real suspicious of the obvious. So I'd like you to think about a couple of questions.

First, which is larger, a K-2 school with 500 kids or a 9-12 high school with 500 kids? Think about it.

OK.

Second question. Which is larger, a ninth-grade academy enrolling 500 kids or a 9-12 high school enrolling 2000 kids? (I don't think we have any ninth-grade academies in Appalachia, yet ... but they could be on the

way.)

You see, don't you, that a K-2 primary school with 500 kids is larger than a 9-12 high school with 500 kids? First of all, it's got only three grades compared to four. ***You got more kids per grade in the primary school than in the high school***.

Second, we're talking an extreme difference in level—primary versus high school. Even in the US, where we're so fond of big things, we've managed to keep elementary schools about half the size of secondary schools.

So grade span and level influence school size. And if you want to compare schools, you'd better do it with a common metric, and that common metric is, logically, number of kids per grade. Don't even think about total enrollment when you think "school size." You're not even halfway there.

In fact, even this is not the whole story. We build smaller schools on average for elementary kids than for high school kids, but the range of variation is tremendous. According to national statistics, there *actually are*

four K-2 schools in the nation that enroll more than 1,000 kids—one in Florida, one in Georgia, one in Mississippi, and one in New York State (not in New York City). Two of these atrociously huge primary schools are located in ***small towns*** according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In fact, however, the largest K-2 school in a ***strictly rural*** location enrolled 917 kids, not much smaller than the four worst cases.

So what I mean to indicate with use of the phrase "constructions of size" is something like, "the way we distort reality to fit our ideology of it." Marx, of course, knew about the role of ideology. He said, "These are my principles... if you don't like them, I have others!" (mime Groucho)

Let me show you what I mean. More and more people are very approving of smaller schools, but they think that by closing two 600-kid K-8 schools and building a K-2 school with 400 and 3-5 school with 400 and a 6-8 school with 400 is the same thing as making schools smaller. Wrong. These schools are all twice the size of the two schools that were closed! Do the math, 600 divided by 9 versus 400 divided by 3. The administration in this case might just as well have created one K-8 school enrolling 1,200

kids. And all those transitions from one level to another are associated with additional threats to achievement. School size is a more subtle phenomenon than people realize. It's not all that difficult, if you can divide, but it's subtle.

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The subtle school-size work for which I'm best known was sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust, based on my dissertation, which was mostly a rip-off of a very interesting study in California, done in 1988. The California folks found that school size had a negative influence on achievement in impoverished schools and districts, but a positive influence in affluent schools and districts.

I repeated the study with West Virginia data, and then, with help from my buddy Bob Bickel, who works at Marshall University, repeated it again in Georgia, Ohio, Montana, and Texas. The patterns were the same, but they were weakest in Montana, where they have lots of small schools and districts. Replications, like this, you know, are supposed to be done to confirm the validity of findings. This is one of the few series of replications

in the educational literature; and it was cheap. We cared about what we were doing. These findings are valid.

So when you think about school size, you have to think not only about grade span and educational level, but also about socioeconomic status. The bottom line here is that one size ***does not*** and ***cannot fit*** all cases. Not everyone agrees, of course. One researcher has claimed that, for maximizing achievement gains, one size of high school ***is*** best—601 and 900 students. I respect this person's work, but this study used a national data set, which means it ignored the incredible variation that obtains within states.

Let me give you an example of the harm that can be done by taking such results too literally. In Montana, in rural areas, they have 131 high schools. Not one of them enrolls more than 600 students. Any Montana policy maker inclined to take the one-size-is-best finding very seriously would want to confer with officials from the West Virginia School Building Authority, which has helped to increase school size by closing over a quarter of the schools in this state. Montanans aren't interested though, thank goodness.

I've barely mentioned district size yet, and that's part of the construction; the size of your district probably influences the ***size*** of your school, the ***administrative climate*** in which your school thrives or starves, its grade-span configuration, and, the influence of school size on achievement. Pretty weighty influences, but almost no one is talking about ***district size***. This concerns me because in the work Bob Bickel and I did for the Rural Trust, the same stuff we found out for schools was true of districts as well. District size matters when it comes to the achievement of poor kids. Not only that, but district size interacts with school size as school size influences the achievement of poor kids.

Bob and I reanalyzed our data from Georgia using a technique that embeds schools within districts. This technique can tell you what the influence of the district size is on school size as school size influences student achievement.

Now, let me tell you about the most amazing finding in that reanalysis with Georgia data. It concerned achievement equity.

Get the picture: there's a relationship between poverty and

achievement, right? We all know this. That's achievement ***in***equity. Achievement equity would be where you reduce the strength of that association. In making this reduction, however, you also and necessarily reduce the association between achievement and ***wealth***, and a lot of people don't like that.

But that's achievement equity: where the poor can do as well as the rich. That's my second bit of critical theory, actually. If you want the poor to do better, it means you have to give up the whole idea of unfair advantage, including ***unfair advantage for the rich***.

So what did we find related to equity? ***Sending poor kids to big schools in big districts is a recipe for the sharpest inequity***. It was a little better to send poor kids to big schools in small districts, and even better to send them to small schools in big districts. But it was best of all to send them to small schools in small districts. That really put the keebosh on the machinery of achievement inequity. This study is up on the web and anybody can read it.

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All of this brings me to my Ohio connection. After 25 years in West Virginia, in Roane County, Kanawha County, and in Putnam County, we moved in 1997 to Albany, Ohio, in Vinton County, within convenient striking distance of my spouse's new job.

Since the move, we've been raising hogs and goats just like the good old days. Anyhow, Appalachian Ohio is a bit of a ***trip*** after West Virginia.

For one thing, they have townships in Ohio. I actually vote in "the township house," a little frame building at the end of my road. They had to build it, when Vinton County closed the local schools, of which the township had four in 1937. In Ohio, many school districts retain a township identity.

In West Virginia, by contrast, the depression did away with townships and with independent school districts, of which there were about 430 circa 1933. By 1935, there were just 55 county districts.

In West Virginia, you're apt to think that it's the only possibility and that the rest of the nation is just nuts for permitting school districts that often span county borders. It would barely occur to you that a county might have

5 or 6 school districts. This is actually how it works, however, in much of the nation.

In West Virginia there are ***large*** districts. Large, that is, for a rural state. People in the Midwest and West blink when you tell them that your rural West Virginia district enrolls 4,000 kids. "You mean 400," they say. Nope, 4,000. "That's a big district," they observe, adding: "You say you're ***rural***? Don't sound like ***that's*** right."

There's a culture of power associated with superintending a place like a countywide West Virginia district. In rural places, schools are often the biggest employers, and this may be increasingly true in rural Appalachia. School systems have a great deal of influence in the local economies of these places. Jobs, of course, are politics.

The rest is history.

I said this stuff a couple of years ago in Morgantown, and John Raese's newspaper ripped my sorry butt. "More districts is just more politics," his paper opined in an editorial, no less. Sure, and more politics is supposed to be just more democracy. "Not any more" is what they want us

to think.

Now imagine Ohio, with its 614 districts. Some of course are more huge than anything in West Virginia. People in Ohio tend to talk about the big 8 — Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Toledo, Dayton, Akron, Canton, and Youngstown, I think — in one category and the other 606 in another category.

I ask that you imagine this, but we who were from West Virginia, could hardly imagine an Ohio with 614 districts. Actually, it was 611 in 1997. They've made three more since then.

Ohio didn't always have about 600-plus districts. In 1950 or so it had nearly 1,700 districts. There were several waves of district consolidation efforts in Ohio, the last in the late 1960s. These campaigns had some effect, but never achieved the level of compacting that the depression so deftly foisted upon West Virginia.

The residue of district consolidation lingers in Ohio, however, both in practice and in ideology. The ideology inscribes a prejudice against sustaining small schools in the regulations of the Ohio Facilities

Commission, which won't provide support for building a new school enrolling fewer than 350 students at any grade level (including the elementary level) and which, I think, requires new construction if renovation costs exceed 60% of the cost of new construction.

You can imagine the sorts of people the state hires to do those calculations. People who own stock in construction companies, most likely.

The rather interesting twist I want to bring to your attention lies in the realm of practice, however. The battleground of consolidation has switched in Ohio from consolidation among districts (where the state has long been frustrated) to consolidations within the remaining smaller districts.

Now, the average rural school district in Ohio is one-fourth the size of the average West Virginia rural district (enrolling about 1750 versus 7000 kids), but the average rural school in Ohio enrolls about 40% more kids. What's happening in Appalachian Ohio? I don't know this stuff from research, which I don't think has been done, but from my experience as a program evaluator working in Appalachian southeast Ohio districts last year. I got to know five districts pretty well.

A common new facilities model in these smaller Ohio districts is the single-campus design. All the district schools and offices are consolidated to a single location, a single campus, and sometimes to a string of attached buildings. And usually, these campuses are in new locations unattached to any town or village. Elementary, middle, and high school all in one spot. That means, typically, all 1750 district kids in one spot. Sounds like a mega school to me.

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So far as school size goes, the news from West Virginia is all bad (though there are, I hear, moves afoot to turn the stream of bad news around), and the news from Ohio is actually both good and bad.

The good news from Ohio, however, is mostly negative and the bad news is all negative. The negative good news from Ohio and from many states that retain links to township organization, which states are located mostly outside southern Appalachia, is that the consolidators have had a heck of a time convincing the people to give up local engagement with school districts. The negative bad news is that they're having more success

separating communities from their schools.

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It gets worse. The ***worst*** part is that all this bad news is ***old*** news. The continuing bad news concerns changes in who constructs the institutional purposes of schooling and what those purposes are. All this has inherently a lot to do with the misconstructions of school size that I've been trying to unpack for you.

From about 1789, the purpose of mass education, just being imagined at the time, was officially to create citizens for the new nation states both in Europe and in North America.

In the 19th century, this was the justification for schools to "Americanize" immigrants, to create people whose very existence as citizens would justify the nation-state. It wasn't just a benign impulse in the US, of course, because it was also the justification to exclude Americans of African descent from schooling.

Most ordinary citizens, however, have never recognized that this was what their schooling was supposed to do—to create citizens by inclusion or

exclusion. Nonetheless, the citizens created by schools served the same purpose in a democratic republic as the divine right of kings did in an autocratic monarchy. Schooling has had a major role in justifying the existence of nation states. We citizens were the reason for the state.

Somewhere in the 20th century, however, perhaps after 1945, or perhaps after 1975, this purpose of nation-building was scuttled. "After the nation was built, what then?" seems to have been the question circa 1959, the date of the National Defense Education Act, the first federal foray into what we educationists call 'regular' education. In place of nation-building we got national defense, and almost no one really noticed.

To defend the nation, we needed soldiers, not citizens, and the preferred mode of combat was economics. In 1959, mathematics, science, and technology were the weapons of choice, pretty much as they are today. That curricular choice, of course, leaves out the sorts of things that interest most of the folks gathered here this weekend.

I'm not speaking lightly about this stuff because I've been reading and writing about globalization lately...again. More and more people are

realizing that globalization—by which one properly indicates the global dominion of capital—spells drastic changes for planetary politics. Politics follows economics, naturally.

In particular, the role of the nation-state will change, is already changing. University of Chicago sociologist Saskia Sassen speculates that whatever the new planetary political scheme will be, ***its citizens won't be people***. She says they will be transnational corporations.

For another take on this issue, Polish political philosopher Zygmunt Bauman says that the counterpart to globalization is "localization," and localization has a lot more to do with incarceration than with community. Local will be systematically destroyed and whatever culture there is, such as it is, will be shipped in from the outside for a price.

Where will locally enduring schools stand in this brave new world?

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So, to wrap up this talk, it turns out that the disappearance of the local school in two Appalachian states quite probably connects to the plans the

that a new political entity, expressing a new economic dominion, cherishes for all its consumers and producers.

Is there something we can do about this? Of course there is and of course there ***will be***. Conferences like this can even be something of an embarrassment to the plans of the globalizer-localizers. I hope it is.

But people are going to resist being diminished by confinement and pacification. At least they have ***often*** resisted in previous eras.

Not only that, but the course of neo-liberal economic growth never did run smooth, and when it stops its smooth run, there will be lots of opportunities for change. We should remember what happened to West Virginia school districts at the last such opportunity, of course.

Finally, many locally cherished schools continue to exist in this country, even in Appalachia. All this talk of disappearance in the face of planet-wide nastiness is relative, by which I mean that both the disappearance and the planet-wide nastiness are incomplete and uneven, and will probably remain that way indefinitely. Some places will just have to suffer. Think about it; the incompletion and unevenness are required. It's

how inequity works economically, just as it does educationally.

What ***about*** schools? Is there a progressive place for local schools in Appalachia? I think the answer is: "inevitably."

It seems to me that schools that are locally cherished—schools where local people prize their localness instead of being taught to resent it—will help people resist Bauman's sort of localization. But they can't do this under the guidance of people whose allegiance lies elsewhere. Bertolt Brecht said it best, "You've got to take over the leadership."

Thanks for your attention.